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ABSTRACT

Some of the areas in which second language acquisition (SLA) theories and research have contributed to language teaching are highlighted. It is noted that while results of SLA research may have contributed to understanding of language learning, insights from such research may have little direct effect on classroom instruction. One explanation is that the SLA research agenda is not necessarily that of a second-language-teaching (SLT) research. This paper culls from the SLA research literature six areas in which SLA and SLT research findings have had or could have impact on teachers' awareness: comprehensible input, focus on form, correction of speaking errors, pronunciation, speech act sets, learning strategies, and factors influencing language learners. It is concluded that a knowledge of SLA research findings helps to inform teachers' decisions, even if these findings are not directly applicable to the classroom, while some of the concepts and tools developed in the process of research on SLA may be directly useful to teachers in conducting needs assessment. Contains 55 references. (Author/LB)

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THE CONTRIBUTION OF SLA THEORIES AND RESEARCH TO TEACHING LANGUAGE[1]

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights some of the areas in which SLA theories and research have contributed to language teaching. The paper notes that while results of SLA research may have contributed to our understanding of language learning, insights from such research may have little direct effect on classroom instruction. One explanation for this lack of effect is that the SLA research agenda is not necessarily that of a second-language-teaching (SLT) research. The paper culls from the SLA research literature six areas in which SLA (and SLT) research findings have had or could have impact on teachers' awareness: comprehensible input, focus on form, correction of speaking errors, pronunciation, speech act sets, learning strategies and factors influencing language learners. It is concluded that a knowledge of SLA research findings helps to inform teachers' decisions, even if these findings are not directly applicable to the classroom, while some of the concepts and tools developed in the process of research on SLA may be directly useful to teachers in conducting needs assessment.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of the areas in which SLA theories and research have contributed to language teaching. The task is not straightforward in that while the results of SLA research may have contributed to our understanding of language learning, insights from such research may have little direct effect on classroom instruction (Larsen-Freeman 1990). One explanation for this lack of effect is that the SLA research agenda is not necessarily that of a second-language-teaching (SLT) research. In SLT research, the interest is directed towards how and why classroom interactions or features contribute to learning opportunities. SLA research has tended to focus more (though not exclusively) on untutored language learning and on out-of-class contexts, and what is minimally necessary for SLA to take place.

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[1] Revised version of a paper presented at the RELC Regional Seminar on "Language Acquisition and the Second/Foreign Language Classroom," 22-26 April 1991.

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What is minimally necessary for SLA to occur in untutored contexts is not necessarily what we should emulate in the classroom. For example, some SLA researchers have pointed out that SLA occurs without a focus on form, often through a process of communicative interaction. While such observation may be valid, it does not follow that practitioners should eliminate such a focus in their classrooms. One would hope that effective teaching would **accelerate** the natural process, or else why would one seek a teacher in the first place? Accelerating SLA might very well involve helpful intervention in the "natural" process just as a medical doctor intervenes so as to speed up the natural healing process of patients.[2]

There are two broad ways in which SLA research has contributed to language teaching: (1) the findings of such research have enhanced teachers' general understanding of second-language acquisition, and (2) many of the concepts and tools developed in researching SLA have proven useful to teachers engaged in the process of needs assessment.

Even though observations of natural learning may not always translate directly into classroom practice, there is no question that findings from SLA research can do much to enhance teachers' understanding of second-language acquisition. With enhanced understanding, teachers can make more informed decisions and build upon, rather than work against, learners' natural inclinations (Larsen-Freeman 1983). From this conviction, then, we have culled from the SLA research literature, six areas in which SLA (and SLT) research findings have had or could have impact on teachers' awareness: (1) comprehensible input, (2) focus on form, (3) correction of speaking errors, (4) pronunciation, (5) speech act sets, (6) learning strategies and factors influencing language learners. It is these six areas which constitute the primary focus of this paper.

1. Comprehensible Input

A hypothesis that has had an impact on language teaching, despite the controversy surrounding it, is that learners move most rapidly toward mastery of a language by acquiring it through comprehensible input (Krashen 1985, 1989). This hypothesis states that more comprehensible input results in more language acquisition, that language teaching methods containing more comprehensible input are more effective, and that language development occurs more effectively without formal instruction focusing on conscious learning. In essence, both children and adults are seen to be able to "acquire" a second language (Lightbown 1985). The message to language teachers has been that rather than attempting to teach the numerous structures of the language, they should focus more on making the language available to the learners for them to acquire forms that are salient to them at their current level of language development.

Recent reviews of the SLA literature would question the minimizing of the effects of instruction on language learning. A review by Long (1988), for example, found that formal instruction

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[2] Krashen (Personal Communication) and others would still argue that pure comprehensible input is the fastest means of acquiring a language and that "tampering" with it by teaching language forms may disturb the nature process, so the debate continues.

does have positive effects on SLA processes. Formal target-language instruction has been found to speed up the rate at which learners acquire the language forms and also to result in a higher ultimate level of attainment (Ellis 1989). In fact, Long (1988) argues that it may be impossible to attain full native speaker competence without instruction. Precisely how and why instruction is facilitative of SLA is an issue we feel is appropriate for an SLT research agenda.

It has also been claimed that input alone is not sufficient for learning to take place, but rather that the learner needs opportunities for negotiation, which has been seen to lead to appropriate modifications in input complexity and amount of redundancy (see, for example, Long 1983). Recent studies have added qualifiers to the issue of negotiation. Ehrlich, Avery, & Yorio (1989), for example, found that meaning negotiations did not automatically benefit Japanese ESL learners interacting in pairs with native speakers, working on a problem-solving picture-drawing task. Rather, the success or failure of meaning negotiations in providing comprehensible input was seen to depend in part on the discourse strategy employed by the interlocutor: **skeletonizing** (i.e., providing only the bare events of a narrative) provided greater opportunity for comprehension than did **embroidering** (i.e., an expanded, embellished description).

Skeletonizers were more likely to repeat previously mentioned information, perhaps breaking it up into smaller units, while embroiderers were more likely to provide new information, in some cases with an inordinate amount of detail. If natives provided skeletonized discourse, the nonnatives were better able to locate the sources of their non-understanding than in embroidered discourse, where each additional detail rendered it more deeply embedded and therefore less understandable. These researchers concluded that if the interaction was to stimulate change in the learners' interlanguage system, then the learners needed to recognize the precise nature of their non-understandings.

This finding runs counter to an assumption in the literature that the mere quantity of meaning negotiations within a discourse is an accurate predictor of the quantity of comprehensible input that results. Hence, such negotiations need to be analyzed within a discourse framework to explain their role in creating comprehensible input. Indeed, many complex factors may determine the usefulness of interactive tasks in providing comprehensible input to learners. Yule and Macdonald (1990) found that in tasks presenting specific referential conflicts which needed to be resolved, higher proficiency learners who were assigned a dominant role often refused to engage in interactive cooperation with lower proficiency learners, sometimes even changing the task rather than negotiating. In such cases, the amount of negotiation and presumably of comprehensible input to the learner improved substantially when higher proficiency learners were placed in nondominant roles. The research by Ehrlich et al. and Yule and Macdonald suggests why particular communicative tasks may only work for certain kinds of discourse situations and not for others, and that the whole area is much more complicated than previously thought.

2. Focus on Form

Closely aligned with the discussion of comprehensible input

and meaning negotiation is the issue of focus on form. More traditional language teaching methods have often put a premium on drilling of grammatical forms as a way of teaching them to learners. Yet the effectiveness of grammar instruction depends on the sequencing of grammar rules and the careful assessment of learner readiness (Pica 1989). At least in the case of grammatical morphemes and other forms that have been studied, it has been found that instruction does not change the natural sequence of acquisition, although it can accelerate the movement across stages of development. Furthermore, "practice does not make perfect" in that even though there are acquisition sequences, acquisition is not simply linear or cumulative, and having practiced a particular form or pattern does not mean that the form or pattern is permanently established. Learners appear to forget forms and structures which they had extensively practiced and which they had seemed to have mastered previously. One explanation for this is that the encountering of new forms causes a restructuring of the learner's whole language system, which may result in simplification (however temporary) in some other part of the system (Lightbown 1985:177, McLaughlin 1990).

With regard to drills, it has been seen that they seem to have generally mixed success in getting learners to internalize the correct grammatical forms. Teachers have often noticed that even if learners are able to demonstrate reasonable control of given structures in practice, they fail once they are called upon to use the same structures in communication. Research documenting such task-related shifts in accuracy of grammar as well as of pronunciation is summarized in Tarone (1988). One theory is that accuracy shifts as learner attention shifts from form to meaning. There is some research suggesting that especially in early stages, learners have problems attending to form and meaning at the same time. In a study of 202 English-speaking students of Spanish, the participants were given four tasks--attending to meaning alone, attending simultaneously to meaning and to an important (i.e., communicative) lexical item, attending to meaning and to a grammatical functor, and attending to meaning and a verb form (VanPatten 1990). Recall of meaning was lowest on the last two tasks, where learners focused simultaneously on form and meaning. Yet classroom teachers often request that students focus not only on the content of the message but on its grammatical form as well.

Given this problem, researchers have begun to take a compromise position supported by SLA theory which is that learners be led to notice grammatical features in the input, compare what they have noticed with what they produce in their current interlanguage, and then eventually integrate the new features into their interlanguage when they are ready (Ellis 1990). This is a departure from the approach that would have them producing correct grammatical forms from the start of the course. Another approach consistent with SLA findings is one that recognizes that all language units have three dimensions (form, meaning, and use) and that it is the teacher's task to systematically focus upon only one of these dimensions at a time, shifting the focus as the needs of the learners shift from moment to moment in a given lesson (Larsen-Freeman 1991).

3. Correction of Speaking Errors

While SLA researchers have not done extensive research on

the effects of error correction on speaking (far more work has been done on writing), the evidence that is available would suggest that explicit error correction may be ineffective in changing language behavior (Lightbown 1985). In an extensive case study on his own learning of Portuguese, for example, Schmidt found corrections by others not to be too helpful because he was not always aware that he was being corrected nor did he necessarily understand the problem (Schmidt & Frota 1986). The researchers concluded that learners need to notice gaps consciously in order to make progress in the target language.

It has been posited that we progress in a target language by testing hypotheses about how the language works, using inferences based on previous knowledge (Schachter 1983), and that learners depend on **negative input** to verify hypotheses about whether their utterances are comprehensible, grammatically correct, or situationally appropriate (Schachter 1984). Such input includes not only explicit correction, but also confirmation checks (i.e., confirmation elicited by the speaker that the utterance was correctly understood or heard) and requests for clarification (new information or a rephrasing of what was already said). Some argue that even a learner's failure to understand an utterance can provide negative input.

The problem is that whatever approach is selected by the teacher, Allwright (1975), Krashen (1982), and others would argue that the correction of oral errors will probably have limited or no effect if learners: (1) are not focused on the form of their message (i.e., its vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation), (2) do not have enough time to consider the correction, (3) do not have adequate knowledge of the area being corrected to benefit from the correction, (4) do not have adequate proficiency to understand the teacher's explanation of what they did wrong, or (5) have too little knowledge about how the language works to know what question to ask to get clarification. Nevertheless, the research basis for these pronouncements is limited. For example, a major survey of studies on oral feedback (Chaudron 1988:136-153) found a lack of research concerning the impact of corrections on learners--i.e., what learners actually do with the corrections, if anything.

Two Hebrew University student seminar projects would suggest that correction of oral target-language utterances may not even be attended to at all--or only ineffectively, and that even repeated and blatant corrections may not "take." Alamari (1982), for example, looked at the way in which 26 advanced adult Hebrew second-language learners in four classrooms related to their teacher's oral correction. She recorded each instance in which a learner was corrected, and then approached the learners at the break in order to ask them what they did when their oral language was corrected in class. Although all the learners said that they wanted to be corrected and almost all said they took teacher corrections seriously, about 20% reported not paying attention to the corrections and only 15% said that they wrote down the correction in their notebooks. Mostly, they reported repeating the correction to themselves. Given our largely intuitive sense that on-the-spot repetition alone may be of limited value, we might question whether it benefited those learners who reported using it as a technique.

Rosenstein (1982) conducted an interventionist study as teacher of a 100-hour university EFL course in spoken English. He collected two-minute segments of spoken language from each

student in each of six class sessions (12 minutes in all) as a pretest and then another twelve minutes of speech as a posttest. An analysis of the transcriptions of the pretest allowed the teacher/investigator to assign all learners an overt error as their "public error" in need of eradication. He also assigned each learner a covert or "secret" error, one that they did not know about. He made sure that this covert error was another student's overt error in order to see if learners would learn from overhearing another student corrected on "their" error. The learners were corrected repeatedly on their overt error.

Of the eight students for whom he had complete data, two showed significant improvement in their public error and one in her secret error at the end of the semester. Another two students showed improvement in their public error and one student in her secret error, but these findings were not at a level of statistical significance. The others showed modest or no improvement in their public and secret error. Rosenstein credited the level of success attained to his general discussions with the learners as to why they made errors, individual discussions with them about their particular public error and explanations for it, written assignments regarding the error, and immediate correction of the public error when occurring in speech. Yet his success was still only about 50% for public errors and perhaps 20% for secret errors. Furthermore, for those two students who did experience improvement in their public error, the errors may have been ones that the learners were just about to acquire anyway in sequence.

The reason why at least half the students managed to emerge from the treatment with little or no improvement can perhaps best be found in the Alamari study: the learners simply were not paying attention to the corrections, not paying attention well enough, or paying attention but not making an effort to remember--as, for example, by efficiently recording the feedback that they received for future reference.

Holley and King (1971) in a study of first, second, and third-year college students of German found that if their teachers gave them from five to ten seconds wait time in order for them to check out what they had said and to self-correct **before** teachers jumped in to correct, the learners were able to spot and rectify more than half of their errors. This study, which involved the use of videotapes, found that the teacher's pause and the non-verbal expectation of student performance created a class atmosphere conducive to student self-correction. The time interval did not produce tension and did not slow the tempo of the lesson noticeably. To the contrary, it was found that teacher correction, explanation, and restatement of the questions took up as much or more class time than extra seconds of silence.

Another study, conducted at the University of California at Los Angeles, focused just on learners' ability to spot the oral language errors that they made (Schlue 1977). Three intermediate college ESL students were audio-taped for 15 minutes once a week and then listened to their tapes for 45 minutes, over a ten-week period. It was found that the students were able to spot their own errors only 25-40% of the time. In other words, they were oblivious to at least 60% of their errors, with their attention to form decreasing the more they wanted to communicate. When they were able to spot their errors, they were able to correct most of these. Hence, one message to the learner and to the

teacher would be to make sure that the learner is afforded an opportunity to perform on-line correction of errors while speaking. This means that the teacher gives the learner time to self-correct rather than providing immediate correction. Another pedagogical implication would be that activities should have a clear intent: accuracy or fluency.

More recent research would suggest that if learners are allowed to make errors within the framework of highly controlled transfer exercises, then correction may have a positive benefit. 32 English-speaking college students of introductory French received one of two treatments dealing with eight English-French negative transfer errors (Tomasello & Herron 1989). In the "Garden Path" condition, students were given a sentence that was likely to be mistranslated because of the difference between the two languages. When the inevitable error occurred, the teacher translated for the students, thereby calling attention to the negative transfer problem that resulted in the error. In the control condition, the students were given the correct French form, told that it was different, and thus not given an opportunity to commit a transfer error. Student learning of the non-transferable form was assessed three times throughout the course of the semester, and each time performance was better in the Garden Path condition. The conclusion was that students learned best when they produced an erroneous hypothesis and received immediate feedback--i.e., got to compare their system with that of the native. This finding confirms the theoretical position by Schachter (mentioned above) regarding the need for negative input.[3]

It also underscores a more general SLA finding that has contributed to increasing teacher tolerance for learner errors. Where it was once thought that errors should be prevented at all cost, it is now understood that error commission is part of the learning process. As such, teacher correction needs to be judicious. This could mean, for example, correcting when the learners are ready for the corrections and have adequate knowledge about the structures involved (as in the "Garden Path" study), or when they have time to digest the corrections.

4. Pronunciation

The SLA literature has perhaps had some impact on the way in which teachers relate to pronunciation accuracy in the classroom. Whereas instruction in the 1940s and 1950s was sometimes built around accurate mimicry of target-language sounds, especially in the heyday of the audiolingual method, researchers have come to find that the accuracy of pronunciation varies when learners are asked to perform different tasks (Dickerson 1975).

One SLA researcher went so far as to demonstrate how increased and exclusive attention to mimicry of foreign-language sounds without knowing what they mean can lead to more accurate pronunciation. Twenty English-speaking university students,

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[3] In three experiments involving the teaching of a rule to adult ESL and French L2 learners, with four feedback conditions and assessment of short- and long-term learning, Suzanne Carroll and Merrill Swain found negative feedback to be useful, depending on the rule being learned and the level of the learner (Carroll & Swain 1991; Carroll, Roberge, & Swain 1991).

ranging in age from 19 to 22, were taught exclusively phonetic material on Chinese, Japanese, and Eskimo, using an eighteen-hour videotaped program for individualized instruction (Neufeld 1977). As a final test, the learners had to produce ten statements which were rated by native speakers. In the case of Japanese, the three raters rated three of the nonnatives as unmistakably native and six as native with traces of linguistic interference from English. In the case of Chinese, one was rated native and seven natives with traces of interference.[4] The finding would suggest that learners far after puberty are capable of achieving native-like pronunciation in a language if that is all that they focus on and if they do not know what they are saying. Yet the reality of the classroom is that a lot more is going on than instruction in the phonetics of the language.

As in the case of grammar, students may actually exhibit control of sounds in practice situations in the classroom, just as they can exhibit what appears to be control of grammatical structures. Then in actual communicative situations when they are not focusing on the forms and not monitoring for correctness, their control seems to break down. This was Cohen's observation when he taught English pronunciation to foreign students at the University of California at Los Angeles. Some of the students could sound quite nativelike in mimicry exercises but in free speech sounded clearly nonnative.

5. Speech Act Sets

Another area in which SLA research has had an impact, however indirect, on language teaching is that of speech act sets. It has become increasingly clear to researchers that learners of a language may lack even partial mastery of such **speech act sets**[5] and that this lack of mastery may cause difficulties or even breakdowns in communication. Early empirical research on speech act sets (e.g., Cohen & Olshtain 1981) was in part prompted by a realization that although transfer occurs at the sociocultural level, few if any contrastive studies were systematically characterizing such phenomena (Schmidt & Richards 1980, Riley 1981, Loveday 1982). SLA research has helped to provide empirical descriptions of speech acts such as requests, compliments, apologies, complaints, refusals, and expressions of gratitude (see Wolfson & Judd 1983, Wolfson 1989).

In recent years, teachers have been encouraged to give attention in their instruction to speech act sets that are likely to be called upon in given speech situations. Before the advent of SLA research on the topic, teaching materials dealing with speech acts had for the most part been constructed largely in the absence of empirical studies to draw upon. They had relied on the curriculum writer's intuition and could best be characterized

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[4] Eskimo had to be dropped from the experiment because only two could be found, who spoke different dialects of Eskimo and who frequently disagreed greatly in their ratings.

[5] The major semantic formulas, any one or combination of which would suffice to represent the particular speech act. Thus, offering repair ("Let me pick that up!") could serve as an apology, or expression of apology plus acknowledgement of responsibility ("I am sorry. I didn't see you.").

as reflecting a high level of simplicity and generality. Popular English-foreign-language textbooks treated speech act sets such as "apology" rather simplistically. For example, emphasis was almost exclusively on phrases used for the expression of an apology: **sorry**, **I'm sorry**, **I'm very sorry**, etc. Brief reference was made to other apology strategies, but without underlying principles for when to use what. No effort was made to analyze the apology speech act set into its semantic formulas, i.e., the various verbal realization of an apology (see, for example, Blundell, Higgens, & Middlemass 1982; Berry & Bailey 1983; Swan & Walter 1985).

Empirical studies concerning the nature of various speech acts in a variety of languages and cultures have been steadily accumulating over the last few years (with respect to the apology speech act set, for example, see Cohen, Olshtain, & Rosenstein 1986; Olshtain & Cohen 1989, 1990). As a result there is a growing source of empirical data on the strategies for performing these acts. Hence, SLA research has provided an opportunity for teachers and textbook writers to shift somewhat from general, intuitively-based materials to more specific, empirically-based ones, which take into account variation resulting from differing levels of formality, severity of the incident, setting and interlocutors, and numerous other variables.

Whereas it is still too early to draw definitive conclusions as to the efficacy of formally teaching speech acts, a study by Olshtain and Cohen (1990) would suggest that the fine points of speech act behavior such as (1) types of intensification and downgrading, (2) subtle differences between speech act strategy realizations, and (3) consideration of situational features, can be taught in the foreign-language classroom. Yet the results of their study left Olshtain and Cohen skeptical regarding the effects of such instruction on the **proficiency** level of speech act behavior.

In a study of nine female Japanese ESL learners tutored in complimenting and responding to compliments and nine untutored students of similar background, Billmyer (1990) collected data of weekly meetings between matched pairs of natives and nonnatives. Participants in both groups were asked to perform compliment-inducing tasks such as showing photos of home and family, reporting accomplishment, visiting each other's homes, teaching each other a proverb, and displaying a new item of apparel. It was found that tutored learners produced a greater number of norm-appropriate compliments, produced spontaneous compliments (unlike the untutored group), used a more extensive repertoire of semantically positive adjectives, and were far more likely to deflect the compliment in their reply than were their untutored peers. Billmyer concluded that formal instruction concerning the social rules of language use given in the classroom can assist learners in communicating more appropriately with natives outside of the classroom.

Although the results of these two studies are encouraging, it is still the case that EFL learners need to acquire not only a new repertoire of realization patterns in the new language but also need to change some of their speech act behavior, which can take a long time. Thus, perhaps the best that most classroom teachers can hope to achieve is to create among learners a level of residual awareness so that they will be less prone to commit pragmatic failure both as producers and receivers of speech act behavior, and come to approximate native behavior more rapidly

(Olshtain & Cohen 1990:57).

6. Learner Strategies and Factors Influencing Language Learners

Of all the contributions of SLA research to language pedagogy, one of the greatest has been the significance it has ascribed to the learning process. From the initiation of SLA research, investigators have been interested in the strategies learners make use of to acquire an L2. Early on, it was recognized that learners invoked strategies such as inferencing, hypothesis formation and testing, and using formulaic speech (first as routines and later as more analyzed patterns). With the pioneering work of Rubin (1975), attention was directed to the particular learning strategies of good language learners. Since that time a good deal of research has been devoted to continuing to identify and classify learning strategies and to determining if they are teachable (see, for example, Cohen 1990). Certainly the potential impact on language teaching is tremendous if teachers subscribe to Wenden's (1985) contention that they should not be content to regard their subject matter simply as language, but rather should be engaged in helping learners learn for themselves.

It is not only in the area of learning strategy preference that SLA research has contributed to rethinking how instruction should be shaped. Whereas at one time research on learner characteristics primarily dealt with aptitude, attitudes and motivation, SLA research the past two decades has also investigated personality factors, cognitive styles, hemispheric specialization, memory, interests, prior experience, birth order, etc. (Larsen-Freeman & Long 1991). While no specific pedagogical techniques can be prescribed based on the evidence that has been adduced thus far, the very fact that there is such variety among learners should underscore the need for teachers to see students as individuals and to work in a way as to take into consideration the diversity of backgrounds in their classes.

This last finding from SLA research--that there is tremendous individual variation among second-language learners--leads directly to the second broad contribution which SLA research and theory have made to language teaching, as noted at the outset of this paper: that of providing concepts and tools used in the process of SLA research which can also be applied to the assessment of learners' needs. Second-language teachers must always innovate to some extent. No one syllabus or set of materials ever fits a group of learners exactly or does any general SLA finding. As a result, second-language teachers themselves are always engaged in a process of research on second-language acquisition--admittedly, research at a very local level, but research nonetheless. That is, teachers themselves need to be able to identify what it is that particular students and groups of students know of the L2 in order to decide how to proceed next. In that process of needs assessment, L2 teachers can be aided by concepts and tools contributed by SLA theories and research.

Tarone and Yule (1989) set out a variety of these concepts and tools, and outline their uses in L2 classroom needs assessment in greater detail than we can provide here. However, some examples may illustrate the richness of this resource for the classroom teacher. Tasks used to elicit data in SLA research

are often appropriate for the elicitation of language in the language classroom, both for the purposes of assessment and (often) for the purpose of instruction and practice. For example, in a communicative task all learners can be given the same content to convey to a listener who needs that content, in such a way that the content and form are controlled, but the language is communicative. In such tasks teachers can easily compare one learner to another, and learners to native speakers, under the same conditions.

As another example, a task designed to investigate learner confidence (Yule, Yanz & Tsuda 1985) could also be used in combination with traditional multiple-choice grammar tests to provide the teacher with a measure of learners' confidence in their answers on that test. After choosing an item on a multiple-choice test, learners are asked to indicate on a scale from 1 to 5 how confident they are of the correctness of their choice. Thus, the teacher can identify those learners who are confident and correct, those who are confident and wrong, and those who are correct but not sure. Such information is surely useful to teachers interested in determining when it is time to move on in the syllabus.[6] As a final example, research on sociolinguistic skills of second-language learners has made use of recorded interactions and interviews. Heath (1986) has proposed a procedure for classroom instruction and assessment which involves helping students in second-language contexts to record their own interactions with friends, family, fellow workers and so on. These language data are then discussed in class. The students may bring up whatever they want to discuss, but usually the focus is on the language as used for social interaction. Only the learners know who the speakers were, what the social context was, and what the outcome of the interaction was. They then function as the experts, and the teacher functions as a consultant to help interpret the language brought to class.

Sometimes frameworks used in SLA research (including frameworks borrowed from other disciplines and adapted for research purposes, as well as frameworks developed solely for SLA research) can also be useful frameworks for thinking about classroom needs assessment and instruction. One of the most useful is Canale and Swain's (1980) concept of **communicative competence**. Tarone and Yule suggest that grammatical competence is the ability to produce **accurate** language, sociolinguistic competence is the ability to produce **appropriate** language, and strategic competence is the ability to **successfully transmit information** in a language. This construct has proved very useful to teachers interested in evaluating their students' L2 skills, since learners may be quite proficient along one dimension, and not others. Another useful framework might be based on Speech Accommodation Theory (e.g., Beebe & Giles 1984), a current model for the analysis of sociolinguistic interaction. This model suggests that when speakers desire the social approval of their listeners, their speech patterns tend to converge toward those of their listeners. Conversely, when speakers desire to emphasize

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[6] Of course, students could also be asked to indicate why they chose a given multiple-choice alternative (Munby 1979) and/or to indicate the strategies that they used in selecting that alternative (Nevo 1989).

their differing group membership, their speech patterns tend to diverge. Such a model might provide a useful framework for teachers interested in analyzing the reasons for progress (or lack of it) in the SLA of particular classroom learners.

Our point here is that, quite apart from firm findings which SLA research can offer classroom teachers--general results about stages of SLA, for example--there are also concepts and tools being developed in SLA research and theory-building which may be directly useful to teachers involved in the process of needs assessment and classroom instruction.

Conclusions

It should be apparent from the topics discussed in this paper that SLA research has made learners and learning central, and in some ways has thus contributed to a shift in focus from how teachers teach to how and what learners learn. Yet while the focus on learners and learning is important, it is not one that always offers straightforward answers to teachers. We have suggested certain pedagogical practices that have been a direct or indirect result of SLA research. We feel that a knowledge of SLA research findings helps to inform teachers' decisions, even if these findings are not directly applicable to the classroom.

With regard to comprehensible input, it has been noted that negotiation for meaning may be important but that such negotiation is a complex matter. Research would further suggest that while a focus on grammatical form is valuable, it is important to focus on meaning and on appropriate language use as well. As concerns whether the correction of speaking errors "takes," it is likely that learners have to be ready for the corrections, have to have adequate knowledge about what is being corrected, and have to have ample time to digest the corrections. With regard to pronunciation, accuracy may vary by task, possibly with poorer pronunciation resulting in situations where the learner is focusing more on conveying meanings than the correct sounds.

The correct realization of speech act sets poses a real challenge for the learner, wherein an awareness of the variables involved may help lead the learner to more successful speech act comprehension and production. Learner strategies are seen as important in that they help learners to help themselves, thus freeing teachers to be in more of a support role. Finally, SLA research has helped to establish the real need to take into account the level of diversity among students. It may be worthwhile for teachers and students to design the learning tasks together in order to more accurately determine the needs of students. The same frameworks and tools used in SLA research can also be used to assess learners' needs in the classroom, as well as being of use in instruction and practice.

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